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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to determine the community power-dynamics affecting operational levies in six Ohio school districts. Three of the levies that were studied passed and three failed. Thirty selected participants were given a focused interview and their reactions were tape recorded and analyzed. Several findings emerged. In the districts that passed levies, the superintendent remained in the background, key active citizens managed the campaign, and the needs of the school were stressed. In the districts with failing levies, superintendents took more of a leading position in the campaign, key citizens did not campaign, and the needs of the schools were not emphasized. Respondents gave realization of need as the key issue on which levy passage rests and maintained that prior consultation of community influentials would help the passage of an operational levy. Implications of the study for community educators are that even though community educators are not likely to hold an influential role in the community power structure, they may mobilize community power resources as backers of community education. (Author/JM)

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AN ANALYSIS OF PERCEIVED POWER DYNAMICS: AN EMERGING ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY EDUCATION LEADER IN THE CHANGE PROCESS

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Brief Review of the Literature

An educational change process involves the elements of community power. There are power holders who can aid or hinder an educational program. A study of community power reveals that influential persons maintain interests in economic issues, special interest projects and controversial issues. Power is an unseen "phenomena" that has been revealed through probing research of sociologists, political scientists and educational administrators.

Researchers in the academic study of community power have indentified power elements which may affect the outcome of an educational issue. The key variables involving community power in the change process include (a) leadership, (b) oppositional forces, and (c) community participation.

A leader functions within a network of social forces and power. This leader may be a stranger to these dynamics. A perceptive leader recognizes that a very small group of people make significant decisions for a vast number of citizens. The community policy group tends to operationalize their policies through second and third level people in community subsystems. Community influential groups exert power, yet they are still sensitive to lower level leaders and the grass roots citizenry.

Opposition forces stem throughout all spectrums of the community. Power groups tend to utilize lower level leadership to divert common irritations and operational conflicts. According to Rossi (1), the elite power persons are not desirous of unfavorable publicity or controversial public involvement. Therefore, community policies may be challenged and developed by oppositional forces without embarrassment to the power holders.

Community change involves participation of the public on important issues. Wellman (2) through his research, identified a process on how community changes are developed through the network hierarchies of the local community. Ideas are first discussed by a small group of top community influentials. A few more influentials give input as the basis for informal participation. Persons in the power elite who may likely be opposed to a proposed plan join the informal discussion. Modifications of informal plans are made to obtain a broader base of support. The planned changes are introduced to formal community leaders in an informal setting. Sample opinions are obtained from selected citizens for reaction and possible modification. The proposed changes are then handled publicly through elected or appointed officials as front like supporters. Committees, speakers and media resources are directly coordinated through elected or appointed officials. Members of the power elite remain in the background. Thus, power tends to be an "unseen" phenomenon in the community.

Nature of a Study of Perceived Community Power

Community power dynamics were studied by this presenter (3). The research schemes became based upon the findings of Longstreth. (4) He satistically discovered an efficiency rank order of organizations knowledgeable about community power. Note that these organizations tend to know where and how power is exerted in the community. The rankings were (a) news media, (b) banking and finance, (3) chamber of commerce, (d) women's organizations.

This presenter selected six Ohio school districts in which three operational levies passed and three operational levies failed. The sample population for each passing and failing levy included the three kinds of school districts in Ohio -- local, exempted village and city. The superintendent from the six selected school districts assisted in the identification of the leading official for the newspaper, local banks, chamber of commerce and the leading woman's organization.

A quota sampling of the selected population of thirty people in six school districts provided a basic framework for data collection. The selected participants were given a focused interview based upon a specially prepared interview guide. The reactions of the respondents were tape recorded and then analyzed.

Basic assumptions were made by this presenter in undertaking this study of perceived community power. The assumptions were:

1. Power structures existed in each of the six selected school districts.
2. These assumed structures affected the nature of the levy outcomes. Reliable and cooperative sources of information would be given by identified officials in the (a) media, (b) bank, (3) chamber of commerce and (d) women.

Limitations in the study have been made. The limitations were:

1. Perceptions of the selected respondents were the only sources of data in this field research.
2. No attempts were made to determine a hierarchy of power in the six selected school-communities.

The findings derived from an analysis of the data had similarities of the literature review. Leadership roles were involved in community power systems. Oppositional forces were significant factors in two of the six levies. Various levels of community participation had an impact on whether levies passed or failed.

Findings

Findings have been analyzed and condensed from this study in relation to the change process that have implications for community educators. The findings were:

1. In the three passing levies, the superintendent remained in the background with active participation of key citizens in the campaign.
2. In the three failing levies, two superintendents took leading positions in promoting the levies while the third superintendent did not actively participate nor did a group of key citizens.
3. Needs of two passing levies were stressed while needs of the three failing levies were not highlighted in the campaigns.
4. Passing levies had cross-sectional representation of active citizens while failing levies lacked an active degree of citizen participation.
5. Respondents gave realization of need as the main reason for levy passage while the other respondents gave failure to see need as the chief reason for levy defeat.
6. Only one school district had known active apposition while that levy passed. One failing levy had opposition which was not known by the superintendent until the election results were completed.
7. There was support in this study that the superintendent should create the campaign and then involve citizens in the campaign activities.
8. The sample population by nearly a ratio of 3 to 1 related that prior consultation of community influentials would help the passage of an operational levy.

Discussion of Findings

According to this study, the key variable in whether a levy passed or failed was the citizen awareness of need for additional school revenue. If people perceived a need, levies tended to pass. If people did not perceive the need, levies tended to fail. The campaign leaders in passing levies highlighted the levy needs and then coordinated citizen participation in the campaign activities. The campaign leaders faced the difficult task of communicating abstract educational needs to groups of participating citizens.

The findings indicate that a successful leader in a levy campaign has a role of coordinating levy activities. The successful coordinator creates the campaign plan for active citizen participation. The successful plan would be developed with consultations with community influentials. With influential backing, the coordinator develops active cross-sectional groups of community participants.

Implications for Community Educators

The perceptive leader in community education realizes that social power exists in the local community. The level of community education will depend upon what community power sources will allow. The leader perceives that power becomes exerted through informal channels. Informal decisions are legalized at formal meetings.

Advisory Council members and school board members reflect the nature of the community. The behaviors of these representatives stem from sources of community power. Leaders search for the identification of influences causing specific behaviors of community representatives. Council and board members tend to reflect the community positions according to their most valued group memberships.

The effective community educator realizes that educators have not historically held high influential rankings in respective communities. On the other hand, educators have the opportunities to identify power structures and to study the nature of local decision-making. Empirical studies derived from sociologists could be undertaken to determine a rank order of reputational power holders. Political scientists offer an issues-analysis approach to determine how local decisions are made. Combinative methods of sociology and political science have potential promise for community educators to identify and to determine how community policies are planned, developed, and implemented.

Even though the community educator is not likely to hold an influential role, he or she may function to mobilize community power resources as backers of community education. The first task would be to work with community influentials in a knowledgeable manner. It would be helpful for the educator to do service in a variety of community projects. Observation in community interaction needs to be focused on who has coffee together in which major community events are discussed in a particular local reataurant. Listen for the frequency of names being mentioned in group settings. The frequency of a mentioned name tends to be more important than the value attached to the discussion of the person. The implication is that the frequent identification of a name is an informal clue to ascribed power in a social group.

The second task of the community educator as a mobilizer of community power is to know how community decisions are likely to be made. The policy makers tend to respect people who become established as experts. Training and leadership abilities are the foremost factors in developing a base of support. Proposals should be made by the

community educator and be defended and modified for public acceptance.

The community educator observes changes occurring within the community as reputations and issue interests vary from time to time. Educational awareness of economic shifts in policy or controversial community solutions provide clues to the current nature of community life. A newly elected slate of officials in local government and/or school board composition provides an indicator to a degree of community change. The leader learns community influences through identification of the powers behind the new office holders.

The efficient and effective community educator assumes that opposition in a reality in a democratic society. The leader realizes that a portion of t[illegible]e be set aside to identify and to function with likely opponents to community education. The leader assesses personal values, ideas, and beliefs of self in relation to opponents so that emerging goals in community education are logically analyzed.

Community education leadership has an envious opportunity to coordinate various power groups to foster desirable program change. The leader knows that the commun[illegible]y education field is designed to touch the lives of each community citizen in a positive manner. The community educator has the challenge to market a product that has a solidifying effort in local social and economic groups. There is a common case - the betterment of a community.

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